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History of British Intelligence Lacks Fireworks of Fiction

ROOM 39. By Donald McLachlan.
Atheneum. \$7 50.

The title of this comprehensive history of British Naval Intelligence during World War II refers to a room in the Admiralty which served as its nerve center. But it isn't a book about spying.

Of 17 sources of information used by the Naval Intelligence Division, spying and counter-spionage were well down the list—and these two activities were conducted by other agencies.

One of NID's main achievements was a tracking room which plotted the whereabouts of German submarines from hundreds of fragments of information. For example, sometimes a sub could be identified from the way its radioman handled his wireless telegraph key.

Code-breaking, ship sightings, captured documents, prisoner interrogation, air photographs and, even enemy propaganda played their parts in the general analyses. Mountains of technical and topographical data were prepared before attacks were launched.

Occasionally information was

too good to be believed. By piecing together seemingly unrelated scraps of data—including a report that the Germans were lengthening the runways of airfields in Poland—one man predicted months in advance that Germany would attack Russia, and came within one day of naming the date, but nearly everyone thought he was balmy.

American readers will be interested in a chapter on how the British helped the United States set up the Office of Strategic Services, which later became the CIA. The British insisted that the United States have a combined intelligence operation for all military branches, although the British themselves did not achieve this until after the war. The late Ian Fleming, who was personal assistant to the head of NID, had a hand in initiating this project.

The book is written from the standpoint of the historian, and the casual reader will be disappointed if he expects the fireworks of fiction. But there are plenty of fascinating anecdotes in it.

Miles A. Smith